



Technology Helps Detectives Resolve Unsolved Cases

By Sarah Myrick

Hundreds of files line the inside of two beige cabinets in the Gainesville Police Department's detective division.

Thousands of pages of interviews, pictures and dead ends all filed under the name of victim of robbery, rape or murder.

The files carry the coldness of justice left unserved.

For 17 years, justice for one University of Florida graduate student was on hold, waiting for evidence to lead detectives to the man who raped her.

The student was walking along a wooded path on her way home from the grocery store when a man jumped out, threw her on a piece of cardboard and raped her. Detectives collected fingerprints from the box at the time but could not match them to a suspect.

John Scieszka had raped other students in Florida and Georgia. Police did not catch him for 17 years – that is until DNA and fingerprinting technology was advanced enough to compare the evidence in the case.

Detectives used DNA and fingerprints to link Scieszka to the 1980 UF case and four other rapes. He now sits in a Georgia prison serving a life term.

"Cold cases" are left to two men

who say their goal is to administer some form of justice and closure.

Gainesville Police Department's Sgt. Will Halvosa and Alachua County Sheriff's Sgt. Kenny Mack try to put families' minds at ease and catch criminals who may have escaped the law for a period of time.

"You always want to give them hope and positive feelings that there will be closure. Sometimes it takes an arrest and conviction for the healing process [to begin]," he said.

New technology, such as DNA testing and advanced fingerprinting, is making these cases solvable.

Halvosa, a supervisor of robbery and homicide investigations at GPD, said the serial rape case shows how important collecting evidence can be to investigations. The evidence may not have an immediate use, but it can later be used when better technology is developed.

"There's no such thing as a perfect crime. There might be something we can do that we couldn't do 10 years ago," Halvosa said.

Neither ASO or GPD has an entire unit of detectives investigating cold cases. However, both men say their organizations are trying to form a unit in conjunction with the Florida Depart-

ment of Law Enforcement. But for now, the two men are left with the cold files and sometimes even colder leads.

Beyond police work, some cases just takes time, Mack said.

Beth Foster, a Santa Fe Community College student, was found murdered in Paynes Prairie in February 1992.

Last May, almost eight years later, a grand jury indicted George Taylor, already in prison in Wisconsin. In that case, police received information that Taylor had bragged to cellmates about killing the woman.

Halvosa said cold cases are often solved because a person will confess to a cellmate or friend. Sometimes it is guilt. Sometimes it is to gain respect among fellow prisoners. So in many cases, Halvosa said, prison snitches and other who have heard about the confessions talk to detectives.

Whether time, technology or good detective work is more important in solving the case, Halvosa and Mack say they do not know – but it is the closure that matters. ■

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Magnetic Ghost

By Fenella Saunders

Every year the FBI is inundated with audiocassettes that may contain subtle criminal evidence of tampering. Now physicists David Pappas of the National Institute of Standards and Technology and Stephen Voran of the Institute for Telecommunication Sciences have discovered a way to see the traces of erasing and re-recording.

In their analysis, Pappas and Voran slide a minute disk-drive head over the surface of an audio-tape. The head is attached to a special microscope that picks up the blobs of magnetism left by a tape recorder's heads, which can indicate whether the tape has been erased, modified, or copied. This technique can recover incompletely erased signals on the tape and could help extract digi-

tal data from damaged black-box recorders. The FBI is trying to get the tape-scanning device certified for use in court. ■

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